



Lenin arrives at the Finland Station in April, 1917

## The April Theses

This is the first part of our ten-part course on Lenin's 1917 work "The State and Revolution". The book has only six chapters, which we will take one at a time from part 4 to part 9 of the course. In the first three parts we will try to furnish some of the prior political context. In part 10 we will pose the question of where Lenin's unfinished work would need to be taken, if it were to be extended in light of the new knowledge that we now have, nearly a century after Lenin's Bolshevik Revolution.

The year of 1917 in Russia was actually a year of two revolutions, and another revolution had gone before, in 1905. The 1905 revolution had seen the formation of the parliament (the Duma) and also the organs of Russian popular power, the Soviets. Both the Duma and the Soviets still existed in 1917.

The “Great War”, or “First World War”, of 1914-1918 was still going on, involving tens of millions of armed men in unparalleled slaughter. It was an inter-Imperialist war. Russia was fighting Germany. The Bolsheviks (under Lenin’s leadership from exile in Switzerland) had refused to take part in this inter-Imperialist war in any way, and instead denounced it and opposed it.

The February 1917 revolution established something resembling a bourgeois-democratic republic based on the Duma. Lenin returned to Russia from Switzerland by train in April, just over a month later. All kinds of questions remained to be resolved. The question of war and peace was the most urgent. The nature of the revolution was still to be decided. In between April and October, and among other things, Lenin pronounced the “April Theses”, and wrote “The State and Revolution”. We will begin with the first of these two.

The [April Theses](#) is a classic document, not because it is polished (it is rough), but because of its impact at a moment of history. It was given by Lenin verbally. The written version (download linked below) was prepared very shortly afterwards.

Lenin arrived in Petrograd (also called St Petersburg, and Leningrad) barely a month after the February, 1917 revolution which had overthrown the Tsar and installed the bourgeois republican government. This bourgeois government had the intention of continuing the disastrous intra-Imperialist war in which Russia was involved.

At the same time, faraway South Africa was also involved in the same war.

It was among those South Africans who opposed the 1914-18 Imperialist war that the need for our communist party was first seriously raised. The Communist Party of South Africa was formed by admission to the Communist International in 1921. That Communist International had been called for by Lenin in this document, the April Theses, in **Thesis 10**:

*“We must take the initiative in creating a revolutionary International, an International against the social-chauvinists and against the ‘Centre’,”* it says.

The Third International (also called Communist International or Comintern) was duly established in 1919.

The “social-chauvinists” of different individual countries (e.g. Germany, Britain, France and Italy as well as Russia) had supported the Imperialist war against each other, while the Russian Bolsheviks and the German Spartacists had opposed the war and had supported proletarian internationalism. The

term “revolutionary defencism” was a code for the further continuation of the Russian war policy, which Lenin clearly opposes in **Thesis 1**.

The “April Theses” are short and do not therefore need a long introduction, but one can usefully highlight the following:

**Thesis 2** says: *“The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution — which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie — ...*

*“This peculiar situation demands of us an ability to adapt ourselves to the special conditions of Party work among unprecedentedly large masses of proletarians who have just awakened to political life.”*

There are echoes of this situation in South Africa today.

**Thesis 4** says: *“As long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticising and exposing errors and at the same time we preach the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience.”*

This led to the slogan “**All Power to the Soviets**”, and **Thesis 5** then says *“to return to a parliamentary republic from the Soviets of Workers' Deputies would be a retrograde step.”*

**Thesis 8** says: *“It is not our immediate task to “introduce” socialism, but only to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies.”*

In other words, the bourgeois dictatorship was to be replaced at once by a dictatorship over the bourgeoisie.

**Thesis 9** proposes to change the Party’s name from “Social Democrat” (RSDLP) to “Communist Party.”

So much of this did come to pass, as we know, that it is difficult to imagine that Lenin’s support for these demands, among the leadership and even among the strictly Bolshevik leadership, was quite small.

But Lenin knew how the base of the Party was constructed and how it was reproducing itself. Hence he was able to be bold. He knew that the Bolshevik cadre force as a whole, and potentially the entire working masses of Russia, were behind his proposals, or soon would be. And so it came to pass.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The April Theses, 1917, Lenin](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).